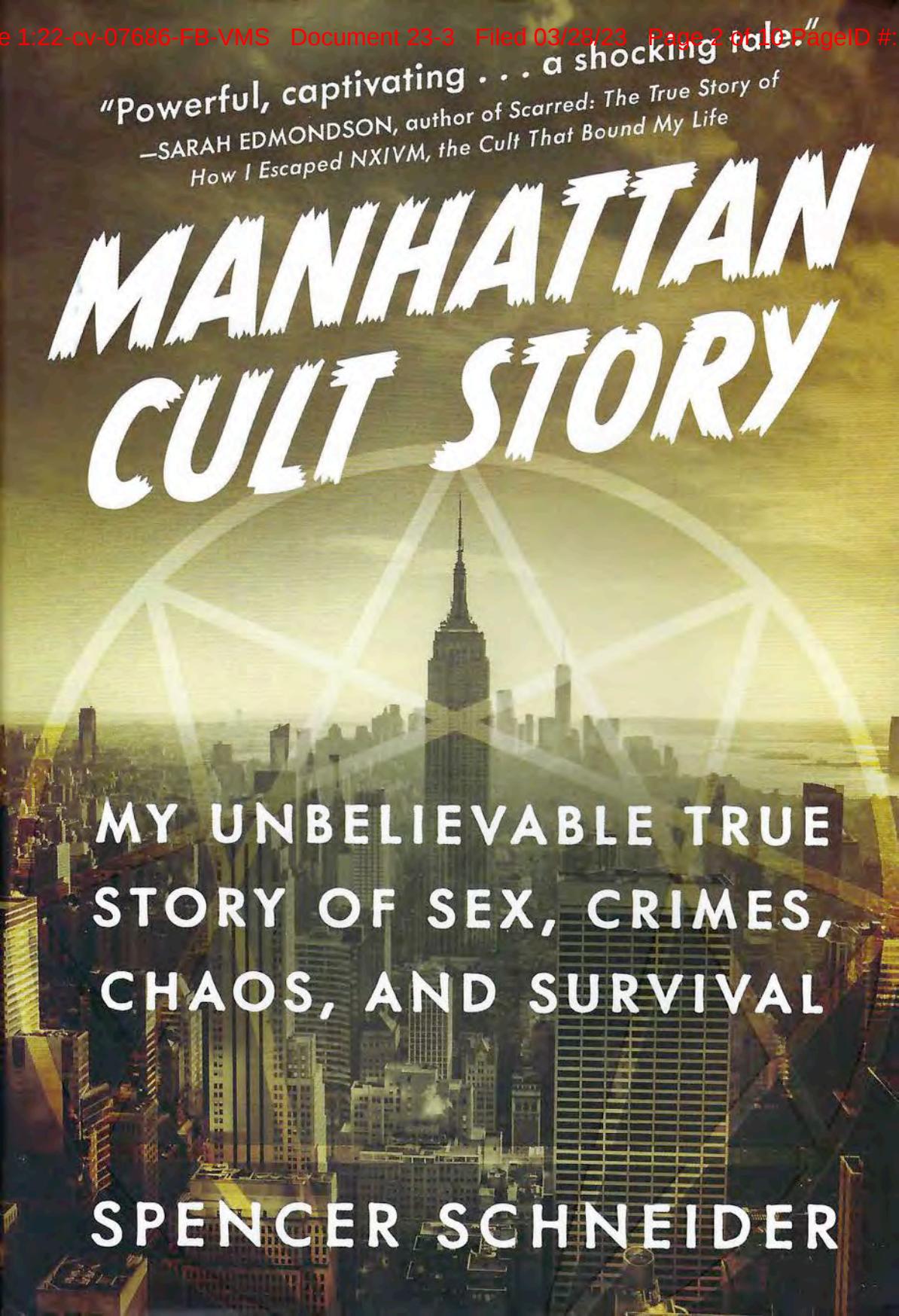


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MANHATTAN CULT STORY



MY UNBELIEVABLE TRUE
STORY OF SEX, CRIMES,
CHAOS, AND SURVIVAL

SPENCER SCHNEIDER

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Contents

<i>Author's Note</i>	xv
<i>Preface</i>	xvii
PART 1: 1960–1989	1
PART 2: 1989–1990	9
Bruce	11
Heather	17
First Class	23
Second Class	29
The Work Works	39
Class Outside of Class	43
The Rules of Evolution	47
Let's Meet Sharon and Robert	51
PART 3: 1990–1999	57
Acting	59
Third Line of Work	65
Have You Made Your Aim?	77
Sharon Nights, Part I	83
Lace on the Gloves	87
Happy, Not Merry, Christmas	93
The Ranch That Consciousness Built	99
Sharon Nights, Part II	115
Integrating	121
Montana 1996 and the Bone	125
“Now, That Wasn’t So Bad”	133
My Friend the Dancer	137

Georgia on My Mind	141
Driving Ms. Sharon and Date Night	143
PART 4: 2000–2009	147
“Time May Change Me”	149
Sharon Nights, Part III	153
Getting Out of Dodge	157
Back to “Normal”	163
Sharon Nights, Part IV: The Sharon Show	167
PART 5: 2010–JANUARY 2013	173
Happy Birthday	175
My Second Story	177
My First Story	183
The Last Impression	189
Kimberly	193
PART 6: JANUARY 2013–PRESENT	197
Over and Out	199
Angry, Evil Blogging	209
The Gans Racket: Crime, Power, and Depravity	215
Survivors	225
Straight Down the Hudson	231
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	235
<i>Appendix</i>	237
<i>Nine Telltale Signs You’re in a Cult</i>	239
<i>About the Author</i>	241

“Now, That Wasn’t So Bad”

When it was over, he lit a cigarette, threw his head back against the pillow in satisfaction, and blew smoke rings. One, after another, slowly. My camp counselor Maury’s tiny Lower East Side apartment was lit only by the yellow headlights of cars moving across the cracked wall. It was 3:00 a.m. It was freezing. I curled up against that wall, unable to sleep. I was fourteen. Mocking my resistance to his deed, Maury whispered, “Now that wasn’t so bad, was it?” His second felony of the morning. Uttering these words, he implied my guilt, and he assaulted my thoughts, memories, and dreams, for what turned out to be nearly a lifetime.

The room smelled of reefer and Indian food from the all-night restaurant downstairs. I couldn’t believe what I had done. It was repulsive. It was worse than getting punched in the face in the schoolyard. Yeah, it was his idea and he initiated it and I repeatedly said no no no no. But I finally did what he wanted me to do. And I *knew* he was bisexual, at least that is what he had told me—why was I there in the first place? I had been able to successfully repel him the last time I had slept over after he had taken me out to see Santana at the Academy of Music on East Fourteenth Street, some after-hours bar under the Queensboro Bridge, and *Deep Throat*. He gave me speed and we smoked a lot of pot. But this time I gave in, and I did what he wanted me to do. He had worn me down; I was tired and now I could get

some sleep without his squirmly, fleshy, hairy, disgusting leg draped over me. Until now, I had never touched another person. Nobody. Why did it have to be with him? With a man, and not a girl? What was wrong with me?

I was humiliated. But it was my fault. I hadn't run away. This could only mean one thing: I was gay. I didn't realize I was gay. I was never attracted to boys. But I needed to confront this. I didn't know much about it, but I did think that being gay was a horrible fate, like some chronic disease.

The following evening I went with my mother and aunt to see *Fiddler on the Roof* at the Jones Beach Theater. I could barely face them. I was consumed with guilt. If my mother knew her fourteen-year-old son had been with a twenty-year-old man she would have been mortified. She might not even believe me: she knew Maury very well and liked him (whenever he called the house they always chatted first.) I could not possibly discuss this with anyone. I would just have to pretend I was straight and live a secret life and hope that my "homosexual tendencies" didn't get the best of me. And although I hated that sick fucking bastard for doing this to me, it was my own fault.

I was haunted by this night—this secret—for thirty-five years. A big part of me felt damaged and unwanted and worthless and ashamed. It had sowed doubt in my very identity. I had kept this secret until I chose to reveal it at Retreat to Sharon.

We were on her porch for a commentary meeting. Secluded, safe, and sleep deprived, it was the perfect atmosphere for divulging the most intimate and painful thoughts, feelings, and secrets among understanding family. A recurring theme this week seemed to be childhood traumas. Sharon had encouraged this—she said it was imperative in order to evolve. And so people were digging and digging into some horrible events; and then sexual traumas came up: Danny told us he had sex with another boy when he was fifteen; Ronald confessed to letting other boys kick his testicles; Sheila said her father had repeatedly raped her sister when she was younger. Sharon would dole out advice that seemed compassionate and constructive. It was safe. And I didn't want to miss this bus or be perceived as holding back or look

NOW, THAT WASN'T SO BAD

like I wasn't working on myself. In this 24/7 School environment it was imperative to dig as deep as possible.

It was serene: clear big skies, snowcapped mountains, warm dry air, soaring eagles, buzzing mosquitoes, the aroma of DEET, and we existed in a state of semiconscious exhaustion. So I jumped in.

"I've never told anyone this Sharon, but it's coming up now."

Sharon looked straight at me, seated ten feet from me in the circle of chairs surrounding her outdoor recliner. Her expression was that of an inquisitive doctor, calm, confident, and ready for anything: she was an expert at eliciting secrets. Especially about sexual traumas.

"Sharon," I said, "When I was fourteen, I touched a camp counselor who was twenty. I was sleeping over at his apartment. He wanted to touch me, but I refused, however, I agreed to touch him instead. It was three in the morning. I could have refused it entirely, but I felt I had no choice. I could have left but I didn't. I have not been able to get over this event. It's been a source of a lot of pain that I brought this on to myself. It has led me to question my own identity. What in my being caused this?"

Sharon didn't bat an eye. She asked no questions. She jumped in with complete assuredness, speaking calmly but clinically, as if she had heard this exact issue a million times before, and generously dispensed her wisdom, "Spencer, it's OK, it really is, and I want you to stop—stop today, as of this moment—stop thinking about this entirely. You can do that. Just stop."

I was relieved. And then she dispensed this nugget of wisdom, "Children experiment all the time with sex. You were experimenting. That's all. It is perfectly normal to experiment with the same sex." And then she normalized it even more, "It's also perfectly normal to experiment with an older boy. So you must stop thinking about this. Will you, Spencer?" I stared at Sharon, in sort of in a daze, and promised her I would.

I was feeling better knowing that this was nothing more than a one-time "experiment" rather than an acting out of a "homosexual tendency." This was normal behavior on my part. And although she agreed that I was responsible for what happened to me, it wasn't

was recently pregnant with twins, and said, "Congratulations Karen, you look wonderful." The entire class oohed and ahhed. And then Joni spoke up and said, "And congratulations to you too, Peter." Joni was about sixty-seven, a diabetic, and was recovering from her second heart attack. A lovely woman, she had been in School for decades. But her remark fell like a thud. We instinctively knew that Joni had crossed the line and had made a serious gaffe. Half of the people in attendance didn't know that Karen and Peter were married because they attended the other class during the week. Sharon, who regulated information such as this, had never informed the other class for reasons known only to her. But the point was that it was Sharon's sole prerogative to share this information between the classes and she hated anyone stealing her lines, as it were. Sharon came down on Joni, but gently, saying, "Well Joni, thank you, but we are talking to Karen tonight only." The night ended without further incident.

I had been coming to classes for twenty-three years and I had witnessed every scene countless times. But now the anesthesia of School was slowly wearing off. I felt the cold steel of the grinding drill penetrating the rotten tooth, just a hair away from the exposed nerve. Every muscle in my body was tensed and the dentist's assistant was holding me down in the chair. The annual post-Christmas class—called the Impressions Class (so named because we each relayed our "impressions" of what a great evening it was) was held a week later, in late December 2012.

Sharon hobbled into class, and we could see she was unhappy. She said nothing. She was helped in by Fred and Beth. She plopped herself down, wincing in pain, and shut her eyes. When she opened them she stared at Joni and roared at the top of her lungs: "You've got a big mouth. How dare you open your trap. It's none of your business to thank anyone. You are asleep. Asleep! It is killing me, and you are trying to kill School too."

It took a minute for me to even remember what Joni's infraction had been. For her part, Joni was ashen, standing, trembling, quiet, and it occurred to me that she might not survive this attack. It went on for fifteen minutes while Sharon lay flat on her leather La-Z-Boy. Fred sitting by her side looked concerned for Sharon's condition. All

other eyes were fixed on Joni. Nobody (not even Joni) had any pity for Joni. But the drill was coming close to my root, and I felt the steel of hate and violence. The class had devolved into automatons, robots—lifeless sycophants. Nobody spoke up—including me—and I was ashamed of myself.

No amount of Joni's apologies satisfied Sharon's wrath. It only made matters worse.

Then—in a scene reminiscent of that time in Georgia with Natia—Sharon started to cry, claiming that Joni's actions were a personal attack on Sharon, herself. This led to an outpouring of sympathy for Sharon, and the class railed against Joni, shouting at her for being “asleep.” Joni was about to faint, so she sat down and started to heave. The outrage against her only intensified. Some people demanded that she “stand up” and take the “help” she was getting. I was afraid for her life.

Next several of the other “teachers”—the capos—including Kim and Maude—mercilessly berated Joni and lashed out at her for her cowardice. Hazel was particularly brutal as she delighted in proving her loyalty to Sharon.

This sickening sight. This horror show. I couldn't tolerate it. And I couldn't hide it anymore. Sharon fixed her gaze on me. I was in the first row of the room. I braced myself. She bellowed, “Stop being negative.” I said, “Me?” “Yeah you!” She shook her head. And that was the last straw.

When class ended, I left, and, although I didn't know it then, that was the last time I would ever see Sharon or any of my classmates.

New York University's Elmer Bobst Library is a twelve-story rust-colored stone box standing on the southeast corner of Washington Square Park. In 2010, a pair of red-tailed hawks built a nest on a twelfth-floor window ledge of the building. It is a federal crime to disturb a raptor's nest, and so it stayed there. NYU allowed the *New York Times* to install a webcam to broadcast the comings and goings of the nascent family. At my wits end, in 2012, I spent hours, daily, watch-